## BEHIND EVERY GREAT WOMAN

He may have the boats and the Ferraris, but Jeremy Heath-Smith, the inventor of Lara, hardly has the time to enjoy them. Looking after his girl is a full time job, he tells TIM WAPSHOTT

"I don't really think of myself as Lara Croft's father so much as her guardian," explains Jeremy Heath-Smith, head of Core Design. "And I'm terrible, I'm everyone's worst nightmare because I'm so protective." However he may phrase it, though, Jeremy still comes across as the proudest father on the planet. He talks excitedly about how Lara has matured and how he wakes up in a cold sweat thinking about the gruesome notion of Lara – The Musical.

As you would expect from a man with a Ferrari parked in his garage – and who is contemplating taking delivery of another he forgot he ordered a little while back – Jeremy has plenty of drive. From his office in Derby he oversees one of the most impressive games studios in the world – the home to Britain's greatest gaming export, Lara Croft.

The first title in the Tomb Raider series hit the streets in 1996 and was the biggest homegrown hit of the year. Traditionally, development houses take at least 18 months to turn around sequels but not Core Design. A year later it released Tomb Raider II and, last year, Tomb Raider III. Both again rocketed to the top. Now Core is again going for number one – with the arrival of the fourth title in the series, Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation.

"The Tomb Raider vehicle has just never slowed down," says Jeremy. "It just continues to gather momentum but it's gathering a more interesting momentum now. The appeal is actually getting broader. What's interesting with Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation is that the specialist press have come back on board. Tomb Raider III was always the sticky one – the third sequel is the one where everyone questions why you're doing it. Nobody really wanted Tomb Raider III to be successful. They weren't negative but there was just no excitement. Well, the excitement is back now and so is the specialist press. There's a real buzz again and everyone's fired up."

Lara's latest adventure is set entirely in Egypt, but fans of the game will also see a new side of their heroine as she makes her debut as a pony-tailed 16-year-old in a flashback.

"She's maturing and we're allowing her to mature because we're maturing with her. Of course, we all have that big reality check that she doesn't exist, that we create what she does. All the same we're maturing her character, this time by taking her back to when she was 16, to open up another small chapter of her life. It's exciting for us because we can bring up a whole new picture and another set of rules for Lara as a teenager. She's continually evolving and going forward. Her story background is set, just like anybody who lives, but there are a lot of missing pieces to the jigsaw and what is fun

For many years the big picture for Cheshire-born Jeremy Heath-Smith were dreams of being a musician. But a gift of the gab and a love of making money soon put paid to those ambitions. "I played jazz and blues on the trumpet and played with an orchestra, but I decided it would be easier to make money." At 19, he got a job selling shower curtains, but he was useless at it and was sacked. He started selling games software for the old Atari machines and excelled. Then, after a few false starts, he found himself running a studio making his own games. Today he is 38, runs Core Design and is one of the powerbrokers of Eidos Interactive. The *Tomb Raider* titles have so far sold about 17 million copies which, even by conservative estimates, means they have

grossed over £360 million at retail.

"One of Core's problems is people always ask what else we're working on," adds Jeremy. "We've worked on some great games and very successful ones they are too. But they've not been *Tomb Raider* successful. *Fighting Force* was a great example, bigger in America than Europe but, still, it has sold a million units. We've just done *Fighting Force 2* and that will be another million-unit seller. Most companies would be jumping through hoops of fire and very, very happy about these sort of figures. But these titles are always overshadowed by the lovely Lara."

Jeremy's devotion to Lara is clear. He shrugs off his protective attitude as par for the course. "I care for her passionately," he explains. "I'm protective but it's so easy not to be because it's so tempting to do everything and just flood her out there. But, before you know it, you've over-exposed her and she's gone. She's on every street corner, she's in every store, she's on mugs, she's on T-shirts, she's on socks. But why do that? Because you are only ever going to do it once. You get one shot at that. Don't bother. The day we do that is probably the day that Lara's appeal has finished and you just go and dump it and move on."

All the same, as the Lara Croft phenomenon powers on, the commercial approaches keep rolling along. One of the most unlikely of which remains Lara – The Musical. "We're in discussions with Andrew Lloyd Webber as I speak!" reveals Jeremy exclusively, sending a loud roar echoing around the corridors of Core Design. "Can you imagine it? I tell you, hell would freeze over first. But, yes, I was approached to do a musical by a chap who's done a couple of decent West End shows. He was deadly serious. I declined on Lara's behalf. I loathe the idea. She'd end up looking like Mary Poppins!"

Lara Croft will be remembered as one of the great popular culture icons of the 1990s, some might even call her a pin-up. The question is, does Jeremy Heath-Smith dream about the character, (who is to many, a dream girl)?

"I wake up sometimes in a cold sweat and think maybe she's dead! Then I remember that she's all right. That she's a cyber character. That she's not going to die and she's not leaving me. I don't really dream about her.

"The only thing that could keep me awake is running out of time to make the games. If you could invent a time machine that could turn 365 days into 380 days it would make life a lot easier for us. Time is the usual problem and in the last few months the team works together very closely for long hours. I spend a lot of my time working with the guys and trying to keep them happy, motivated and inspired. It's hard work."

There is life outside Lara Croft's world for Jeremy Heath-Smith, but not a lot of it. He is a father of four and has a passion for boats. "I've got a boat across in north Wales, which at this time of the year is pretty chilly," he says. "It's a 20ft-speed boat. I've also got a sailing boat – a catamaran – which I race. She's great fun. She's a small boat. Not really expensive. To be honest, extravagance is something I don't really do. I don't really have time to do it." #